



Alternative Foods, Activism and Strawberries in California

An interview with Julie Guthman

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Are alternative food movements the panacea for obesity, food-induced health problems and, simply, bad food? One doesn't need to be a reactionary to see the limits of the proposal, but we still have a hard time relinquishing that belief. Julie Guthman, whose work almost single-handedly launched scientific inquiry into those questions, helps us understand why.

Julie Guthman is a geographer working on nutrition, farming practices, and food movements at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Her work has received considerable attention since her first article on these topics was published in 1997. Starting with an attention to the contradictions of the organic food industry, she has developed a body of work that places the alternative food movement within local, regional and global contexts and offers a strong, if friendly, critique of what is now a vibrant cultural phenomenon in the U.S. She published *Agrarian Dreams: the Paradox of Organic Farming in California* (University of California Press) in 2004 (2nd edition 2014), and *Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism* (UC Press) in 2011.

Books and Ideas: You're widely known as specialist of obesity and organics. But more generally, you could be described as a practitioner of Food Studies, a field that is both fairly recent and fairly specific to the Anglophone world. What is it about and how did you come to it?

Julie Guthman: There is a lot of scholarship that comes under the name of food studies, including in the hard sciences. But within the humanities and social sciences, I see three different threads. First, there is quite descriptive work that almost crosses over into popular literature and describes a food experience, a restaurant, food products, often in an adulatory way. Second, there is a tradition coming out of cultural studies and anthropology that looks at food as a way to understand particular cultures. And then, there is the school to which I relate more, which is geographical and sociological studies of food focused on food production and consumption systems, either as a way to understand underlying social structures and ways of being; or, increasingly these days, as activist projects of social change. It comprises studies looking at technologies of marketing, labor practices, production practices, and how they come together, and studies of industry structure as well.

The California Food Revolution

I came to those studies in a very specific context, which is California in the 1990s. I was trained as a geographer a discipline in which critical food studies has really blossomed, along with in rural sociology. In a seminar in graduate school two of my colleagues and I wrote a research paper looking at organic salad mix, *mesclun*, in California.¹ Back in the 1980s economic boom, there had been this wave of well-known chefs who began to serve organic salad mix at their high profile restaurants, starting with Alice Waters from *Chez Panisse*, in Berkeley, who studied in France and came back with *mesclun*. By the 1990s, there were also all sorts of copycats. It was a really big phenomenon among young urban professionals—and the social sciences had written nothing on it. The study was published in a European journal, and became the seminal article on organics to which many responded, especially regarding two claims we made, that: 1) organic agriculture was becoming like conventional agriculture (that's the conventionalization thesis) and 2) there was a clear distinction between the growers in organic that were more conventional and the ones who stayed more true to the ideal of a small-scale, artisanal agriculture (that's the bifurcation thesis).

In that same seminar, we had read some of the numerous books and articles on food systems that had come out in the early 1990s, on commodity chain analysis and food regimes, works by Philip McMichael, Harriet Friedmann, Terry Marsden, David Goodman, Bernardo Sorj and John Wilkinson.² That wave of research was a response to old rural sociology that was not considered critical enough of current agricultural practices. This new wave of scholarship came up with robust concepts to describe the food system in the U.S. and Europe, concepts like “appropriationism” (when you take farm inputs, commodify them and sell them back to the farmer) or “substitutionism” (when the industry brings food production into factory, often with fabricated substitutes). There was also a regional context to my interest for the question and the way I developed my research. In fact, I was also responding to the large literature on California's agrarian history.

California has been considered the “great exception” to agricultural development, in the words of journalist and historian Carey McWilliams, writing in the 1930s. California's agriculture was never based on peasant farming. There never was a transition from peasant to capitalist farming. It was capitalist from the get-go. When Anglos settled California in the gold rush of 1848-1849, there was a lot of capital available that was invested in agriculture. It relied immediately on vulnerable people to do the work—first Chinese, then Japanese, Mexicans, displaced white farmers from the South-East, and today undocumented workers from Mexico or South America. That allowed California to grow specialty crops that are very

¹ Daniel Buck, Christina Getz and Julie Guthman. 1997. “From Farm to Table: The Organic Vegetable Commodity Chain of Northern California”, *Sociologia Ruralis*, vol. 37, Issue 1 (April 1997), p. 3-20.

² Harriet Friedmann, “International regimes of food and agriculture since 1870”, in Teodor Shanin, *Peasants and peasant societies*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1987, p. 258–76; Harriet Friedmann and Philip McMichael, “Agriculture and the state system: the rise and fall of national agricultures, 1870 to the present”, *Sociologia Ruralis*, 29 (2), 1987, p. 93–117; Philip McMichael, “A food regime genealogy”, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 36 (1), 2009, p. 139–169; Terry Marsden et alii, *Constructing The Countryside: An Approach To Rural Development*, Routledge, 1993; David Goodman, Bernardo Sorj, John Wilkinson, *From Farming to Biotechnology: A Theory of Agro-industrial Development*, New York, Basil Blackwell, 1987.

labor-intensive (fresh fruit and vegetables), along with dairy cattle and wheat. Commodity crops like corn and soy were never as big. In *Agrarian Dreams*, the book that came out of my dissertation, which built on my 1997 article, I used some of the literature of these mostly historical works on California agriculture to contextualize the organic movement in the long-term history of the region.³

That topic—organics—actually just fell into my lap: very few social science researchers were looking at it at the time, and I was exceedingly fortunate to have found it. One of the things I saw is that making organics sellable in the marketplace required standards, that required certifying institutions to make sure those standards were upheld. Growers who abide by these standards and the hassle of certification are supposed to be rewarded with a price premium. But the problem is that these also worked as barriers to keep other producers out. Also, when the economy is not doing well fewer consumers are willing to pay the cost for organic. That means there are real limits to growth in organic production. Fair trade has similar dynamics and problems around standard setting. When Starbucks got into fair trade, they first try to water down the standards.

Foodies and Health Issues

Books and Ideas: From the start, your work was an attempt to offer a friendly critique of the enthusiasm for alternative food, and it's been immensely successful. How do you explain this, both the way you framed your topic and the response it's received?

Julie Guthman: I happened to be writing at a time that the foodie revolution in California had really taken off. The popular media had picked up on the idea of a big, bad food system at work on a global level, and therefore saw all that was local, seasonal, and non-industrial as an antidote. While even in *Agrarian Dreams* I was critical of organics and its cost, and of some of the issues around labor involved in organic production, I began to develop a deeper critique of alternative food in the context of my current job at UC Santa Cruz.

In 2003 I was hired as a professor in the Community Studies program. The heart of the program is that students do a 6-month field study with a social justice or social change organization and I was hired to work with the many students who wanted to work on food and agriculture issues. Every year I had 20 to 25 students who came to my classes with an interest in changing the food system, by promoting alternatives like organics, community food security, fair trade, or developing local food systems. For years I saw the field of food activism through the eyes of my students. And what they were seeing were emerging

³ See for example Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California*, Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1939; Walter R. Goldschmidt, *As You Sow: Three Studies in the Social Consequences of Agribusiness*. Montclair, N.J: Allanheld, Osmun and Co. Publishers, Inc., 1947; Cletus Daniel, *Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farmworkers 1870-1941*, University of California Press, 1982; 1994; Miriam J. Wells, *Strawberry Fields: Politics, Class, and Work in California Agriculture*, Cornell University Press, 1996; Richard Walker, *The Conquest of Bread: 150 Years of Agribusiness in California*, New Press, 2004; Don Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops: Labor, Landscape, and the Struggle over Industrial Farming in Bracero-Era California*, Athens, GA, University of Georgia Press, 2012.

contradictions with efforts to address the shortcomings of organics. For instance, because the local food movement has come to cater to relatively wealthy consumers, the food justice movement has been trying to create alternative sources of food in lower-income areas, many of which are populated by non-white people. The idea is to provide healthier, local food to people who live in food deserts: places with little access to fresh fruit, vegetables, meat and dairy products, places where there were only convenient stores and liquor stores. There has been enormous effort in the last decade to set up community gardens, produce delivery services, farmers' markets in those neighborhoods. But as my students came to see, much of these efforts are coming from white, affluent people, and are almost a missionary practice. Like most missionary practices, they often don't resonate in neighborhoods that they are trying to serve. Many people living in those neighborhoods just want a supermarket to be located there, and they don't want the white hippies telling them what to eat. I wrote an article on this that's been widely circulated.⁴ I have seen how this type of friendly critique helps move the conversation forward. Many of these organizations are now very conscious of the problem and work hard to address the needs of community residents. This is just one example where scholarly critiques have generated a positive response in alternative food movements, which has changed its discourse.

Books and Ideas: There has also been an incredible development of alternative food consumption in the U.S. in general, not just in California, over the last decade or so, all the way to the White House. How big a change has it really been?

Julie Guthman: Much of the food consumed in the US is still pretty bad and is barely recognizable as food, if you think about it. And there's been a clear reaction to the growth of alternative food. The right wing Tea Party types make jokes about Obama liking arugula and occasionally defend trashy food as a kind of American cultural heritage. But there is a very vibrant and vocal food culture offering alternatives in major urban centers and university towns. It's pretty regionalized, though. In California, you can sometimes grow fresh fruit twelve months out of the year, and it's definitely big. Most of the consumers live in coastal, left-leaning cities like New York, San Francisco, Portland, Seattle. They also remain white, highly educated, and fairly affluent. The focus is very much on local food—not terroir, but an emphasis on local supply for urban markets and restaurants especially. The restaurant culture in the US is huge, and very visible. 70% of Americans eat organics occasionally, according to one poll I saw, which I admit sounds unlikely, especially since only 1% of US farm land is in organic production. Nevertheless, the public's imagination has really been captured by alternative food. People who use academic research on the subject in popular books, like Michael Pollan, are public heroes.

Books and Ideas: Hasn't a lot of the attention alternative food has been getting come out of fears—starting with the fear that the U.S. is undergoing an obesity epidemics?

⁴ Julie Guthman, "Bringing good food to others: investigating the subjects of alternative food practice", *Cultural Geographies*, 15, 2008, p. 425–41.

Julie Guthman: My recent book, *Weighing In*, is written to further the conversation, to discourage food movements from using the so-called obesity epidemic and its vilification of fat people, as a way to justify food activism. As I see it, local, organic food has been framed as a solution to obesity. It's the same logic: if the food industry is the problem, then local, organic food must be the solution.

But really there's so much we don't know about the causes of obesity. For example, many blame the sugar in sodas as a major cause of obesity – and no doubt they play a part. With this knowledge, many people drink soda with artificial sweeteners. But now there is science that suggests that zero calorie substitutes for sugar also produce an insulin response that produces fat.⁵ There is even more emerging evidence that the reason why people have become fatter in the US is more complex than just the calories they take in. Environmental toxins have been shown to play a role in producing fat cells when pregnant mothers are exposed. Antibiotic use is now associated with obesity, because it knocks off some of the gut biota – and gut biota seem to play a role in fat regulation according to recent studies.⁶ Chronic stress, sleeping patterns also appear to play a part. All that suggests that fresh food and vegetables and exercise might not be enough to change current trends in obesity.

But there's also the question about whether obesity is the problem it is made out to be. There's no question that Americans (and many others) have gotten fatter, but have they necessarily gotten sicker? Fat may not be aesthetically pleasing given our current obsession with thinness, but we really don't have a good sense of what about being fat is pathological. Associations between diabetics and obesity might be ill-understood. Several epidemiological studies show that people in the overweight category of Body Mass Index outlive people in the normal category, because fat is protective. Given how much we don't know about the causes and consequences of obesity I would say that shaming fat is counterproductive. The war on obesity has encouraged more discrimination.

New challenges

Books and Ideas: Does this new context mean that it's now easier to study food issues? Or even that there is a state demand for it?

Julie Guthman: The state really doesn't play a big role here. A lot of the alternative food movement in the U.S. can even be described as neo-liberal in the sense that they are encouraging market behavior as a way to solve social problems. Organics is about reducing the use of pesticides and encouraging more conservation-oriented soil uses, by creating a market with incentives. A lot of these alternatives are not looking toward the state as a way to redistribute or regulate. Some are even anti-state. There's a US tradition of regulating food, although some of these regulations have been ambiguous in what they accomplished: the 1906 Act that began food and drug regulation at a federal level put a lot of small businesses

⁵ Michael L. Powers and Jay Schulkin, *The Evolution of Obesity*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009.

⁶ See for example John K. DiBaise, Daniel N. Frank and Ruchi Mathur, "Impact of the Gut Microbiota on the Development of Obesity: Current Concepts", *American Journal of Gastroenterology Supplements* (2012) 1, p. 22–27.

out of business. However, If you've grown up in the last thirty or forty years in the US it's really hard to imagine the state ever doing anything good. For my students, anything big, whether business or government is bad. And there hasn't been any major positive developments in state regulation of food in decades.

Thankfully, the US still provides food assistance, and it's a huge safety net for millions of people in the US. Food assistance goes back to the New Deal that emerged in the Great Depression. This is when the US government started subsidizing farmers by purchasing surplus commodities when farm prices are low. Farm programs were able to find continued political consensus by serving both farmers and the urban poor: first it was about giving away what were called surplus commodities, then came the School Lunch program, food stamps, and other programs that provided food assistance to the poor which to some degree provides a market for farmers. In other words, whenever a farm bill is discussed, money is allocated for both crop subsidies and food stamps, so as to get a consensus between rural and urban constituencies. Republicans have been wanting to uncouple those, to get rid of food stamps are a least reduce them to a minimum. Sadly, a lot of the alternative food initiatives simply ignore such programs: for them, it's all about bringing together consumers and producers, not about influencing the state and defending these programs that have increasingly come under attack. Nor has the alternative food movement wholeheartedly worked to change the crop subsidy programs the encourage some of the worst agricultural practices. There is an Organic Trade Association, and the big players in organics have a lobby. But their focus is on research, certification cost share and crop insurance for organics, but not on altering farm policy more generally to encourage more sustainable production practices. This is another ways that organics don't change the system except in very limited way.

Books and Ideas: Where is your research going now?

Julie Guthman: So much of food studies has becoming focused on assessing the alternatives, with a kind of more activist orientation. I started that trend and I have to confess I am a little tired of it now, even when it is not entirely laudatory and uncritical. Organics, community gardens, farmers markets, community-supported agriculture, food justice are good topics, but these represent a minute percentage of how food is produced and distributed. It's obviously a lot easier to study people in a community garden or a farmer's markets than understand how a complex supply chain works, especially given that so much information is proprietary.

Still, there are new trends that deserve studying. I just put in a proposal for a multicampus collaboration on "science, technology and the future of food" which I hope will be a platform to encourage new directions in food studies. The hope is to look at new food inventions such as in vitro meat or plant proteins as substitutes for eggs, and understand how the boundaries of what constitutes food are being reshaped by such inventions.

I also am working on a major research project of my own: it's about strawberry production in California in the face of the phase out of methyl bromide, a soil fumigant that has been embraced by the strawberry industry. The Montreal protocol on ozone-depleting substances

banned methyl bromide in 1985, but the US argued that the industry couldn't live without it and got exemptions for a long time. But as of now, it will no longer be allowable by 2015. Meanwhile, alternative chemical fumigants have also seen more scrutiny. The strawberry industry is greatly dependent on these fumigants to manage soil pathogens. Strawberries are the sixth largest crop in revenues in California and farmers expect to receive 50,000 dollars an acre in sales. Strawberry land prices accordingly and I've heard of sales of strawberry land for 100,000 dollars an acre, comparable to Napa Valley wines. Coming from my research on endocrine disrupting chemicals and obesity, my original research question was on the health aspect of strawberries, specifically whether knowledge about the intergenerational effects of the fumigants, especially on agricultural workers, would shift industry practices. But now the research is focusing on what the industry is doing to deal with the tighter restrictions on fumigants. It's delicate work, and I have to be very reassuring when I talk to these farmers, who are sometimes wary of my intentions. I am genuinely interested in their perspectives. The fact is that it is very difficult to grow strawberries under existing conditions and I don't blame growers for being worried. Talking with growers again and learning of their political economic pressures has brought my work full circle to California agriculture.

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